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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the literature and a survey of first-grade teachers, this paper provides a summary of the ways children grieve, children's ideas on death, ways to help children contend with the difficulties surrounding death, and teachers' feelings about discussing death in the classroom. Twelve teachers completed a questionnaire about how to effectively respond to children's feelings and ideas about death. Findings revealed that most of the teachers had students who had experienced a death in their family and that the teachers had discussed it privately with them. Most teachers had no training in dealing with death in the classroom, and half had not read adult or children's literature about death. Teachers suggested several ways to discuss death with children, including having children write or draw in a journal, asking school-based support teams for suggestions, telling children about personal experiences with death, and using children's literature to discuss the subject. The paper concludes with several suggestions for helping teachers discuss death with children, and lists pertinent books for teachers and for children. (Contains 17 references.) (EV)

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First Grade Teacher's Feelings About Discussing Death In The Classroom And Suggestions To Support Them

Minerva Velazquez-Cordero

This research provides a summary of the ways children grieve, children's idea of death, ways to help children contend with difficulties, and teachers feelings about discussing death in the classroom. I asked twelve, first grade teachers where I work to answer a questionnaire about their feelings about discussing death in the classroom. Included are suggestions on how teachers can help grieving children.

Everyone, young or old has to experience death in their lives. Many people may think that children ought to be shielded from this harsh reality but that is unrealistic. Teachers often have to discuss death in the classroom and have little knowledge on how to discuss it. It is therefore important for teachers to read or receive some training on death education that can help them to understand how children grieve and their idea of death.

The ways children grieve

Children act out their feelings rather than talk about them. One child might be boisterous and provoking, while another might be quiet and withdrawn. Behavior problems and difficulty concentrating are common. Some children may react by having nightmares, stomachaches and headaches.

Others become so overwhelmed by anxiety or sadness that their emotions freeze or adversely turn frivolous. These children may feel there is something wrong with them because they are

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unable to cry or experience the sorrow that others are displaying. Teachers can explain to the class that there is no one right way to react to death. Children from different cultural backgrounds may express grieve in unfamiliar ways (Cohn, 1987,p78).

Children's concept of death

Young children ages three through six often think that death is reversible and they imagine that their loved one will return after death. Three-to five-year olds often take language figuratively and many common clichés confuse children. The following are a few inappropriate clichés:

"God loved Grandpa so much that he took him with him to heaven."

"Mom's watching over you."

"Dad went on a long trip."

"Grandma went to sleep."

Five-year-olds may ask for facts and details of the death. They may also ask about the nature of death and what happens after someone dies. Another component of how the young child views death is magically and egocentrically. Children often feel that their thoughts and words can magically cause things to happen. A child may feel that because he wished his sister dead and she dies that he is to blame (Goldman, 1996,p70).

A number of studies have found that the years between ages five and seven are pivotal in the understanding of the idea of death. Several studies using Piaget's theory have been the use of tests of conservation, coupled with questions about death, to

differentiate children who have a mature versus immature understanding of death (Essa & Murray,1994,p75).

Much of the research of the past two decades has concluded that children's understanding of death involves understanding of four general components:

Finality implies an understanding that death is not reversed by magic, medicine, food and water, or other means, something preschoolers often believe can happen.

Inevitability involves an understanding that all living things including oneself, eventually will die and that no one can escape death. Preschoolers tend to see death as something that is avoidable and happens only to other people, while older children recognize death's universality.

Cessation of bodily functions involves the recognition that death ends all movement, feeling, sensation, thought, and other abilities. Preschool-age children may view death as somewhat akin to sleep or may think of a dead person as having diminished functionality rather than no functionality.

Causality involves an understanding of why death occurs. Younger children tend to attribute death more to external causes, such as guns or accidents, while older children recognize internal causes, such as old age, illness, or some other biological factor.

Many studies have found that the time between ages five and seven is pivotal in an understanding of finality, inevitability, and cessation of bodily functions. Around this age, children seem to grasp that death happens to everyone. For most children, an

understanding of causality seems to develop at a somewhat later age. Causality is the most difficult of the sub-concepts to comprehend because it requires knowledge and of biology and abstract thinking (Essa & Murray, 1994,p75).

Ways to help children cope

1.Encourage children to express their feelings but do not push for too much.

2.Answer questions truthfully and express your emotions honestly.

3.Discuss death in terms children can understand.

4.Relate to children at their developmental level. If you are unsure of their level ask them for their interpretation of what happened.

5.Be patient. Be aware that children may repeat the same questions as they seek reassurance and deal with confusion and fear.

6.Do not pre-establish expectations. Each child deals with death differently.

7.Do suggest some ways a child can memorialize the person such as planting in that person's honor, drawing a special picture, or writing something about the person.

8.Accept the child's feeling, perceptions, and reactions. Allow for differences of opinion, doubt, and questions.

9.Refer the child (and perhaps the parents)to other support people or services if necessary.

10.Prepare children for the continuation of their life. Reassure them that they will feel better after a time and that the time differs from person to person(Thornton & Krajewski, 1993,p33).

Teacher's feelings about discussing death

Teachers feel ambivalent about how to effectively respond to children's feelings and ideas about death. The areas of death that are particularly difficult for teachers to discuss are the death of parents or other close relatives and the death of a child in the class (Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1987,p284).

A survey revealed that eighty-three percent of teachers believed that academic preparation to present formal instruction at the preschool level was moderately to very important. However only twenty percent felt prepared to do such instruction. The survey revealed that comfort in discussing death with children tended to be higher for teachers who had received instruction on how to discuss death with young children (Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1987,p281).

I think a large percentage of teachers will always feel ambivalent about discussing death because it's a doleful subject.

Becoming comfortable with questions about death

I think training teachers about how to discuss death is important. This will help them feel more confident in answering questions and providing support to those children in need. Teachers should also have an understanding of the behaviors bereaved children may exhibit, the duration of children's grief, and the stages children may go through in grieving (Thornton & Krajewski,1993,p33). Inexperienced teachers may confuse young children if they say the wrong thing. Teachers can also use resources like books, videos and counselors to help them provide

answers to questions about death. Death is a natural phenomenon that we as teachers need preparation to discuss in the classroom because it can occur to any of our students or their friends and relatives.

Some ways to assist grieving parents

- Contact the parent by phone and /or by note to express concern or sympathy and to open channels of communication.
- Schedule a parent conference if desired by the parent.
- Distribute helpful articles focusing on parent concerns.
- Recommend children's books (to be shared at home) that deal with the topic in a sensible manner.
- Distribute written guidelines and/or suggestions especially if an individual situation requires more specific attention. (Thornton & Krajewski, 1993)

This research has led me to wonder about how the teachers where I work feel about discussing death in their classroom. I decided to ask some teachers to provide their feelings about the subject.

I asked twelve-first grade teachers who work with me to answer a questionnaire. Seven of those teachers have been teaching for less than five years. The majority are Hispanic and in their 20's and 30's. I did not know if they had ever experienced death related to the children in their class. I also wanted to know if the teachers had given thought to how they might deal with death when children experienced it.

The questionnaire included eleven questions about their experience and feelings related to discussing death in the classroom.

What I found

Most of the teachers had children who experienced a death in their family and discussed it privately with them. Three of them felt uncomfortable discussing the topic with their students. Only two teachers had taken a class about death. Most had no training and felt that their administration should provide training on this topic. Half of the teachers have not read adult or children's literature about death. This is disappointing because there are many books for children on this topic. Teachers need to be aware that death is a natural part of life. Children do not understand and we should be more sympathetic and supportive toward them.

Suggestions for helping teachers discuss death with children

Teachers themselves suggested the following:

- Have the child write or draw in journal to express emotions.
- Speak with child about feelings.
- Ask school-based support team for suggestions.
- Ask caregivers what you can do to help.
- Tell child about your experiences with death.
- Use children's literature to discuss the subject.

My suggestions for helping teachers discuss death with children

- Enroll in a class about death that can help with your teaching.
- Read adult literature to help enhance your understanding of what children need when they are grieving.
- If the child is very angry, let him take out his frustrations on a pillow or a punching bag or suggest that he does something constructive like work with clay.
- Take a trip to the cemetery and explain what people do there.
- Have the child write a poem or a story about the person who died.

Books for teachers

Fitzgerald, H. (1992). The grieving child. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Fox, S. (1988). Good grief: Helping groups of children when a friend dies. Boston: New England Association for the Education of Young Children.

Goldman, L. (1996). Breaking the silence: A guide to help children with complicated grief. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Goldman, L. (1994). Life and Loss: A guide to help grieving children. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.

Roberts, J., & Johnson, J. (1994). Thank you for coming and saying good-bye. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

Books which teachers can share with young children

Carson, J. (1992). You hold me and I'll hold you. New York: Orchard.

DePaola, T. (1973). Nana upstairs and Nana downstairs. New York: Putnam.

Johnson, J. & M. (1990). Tell me Papa. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation

McGraw, S. (1986). Love you forever. Willowdale, Ont: Firefly Books

Rogers, F. (1991). So much to think about. Pittsburgh, PA: Family Communications, Inc.

Stein, S. (1974). About dying. New York: Walker & Co.

Viorst, J (1971). The tenth good thing about Barney. New York: Atheneum

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Cohn, J. (1987). The grieving student. Instructor, 96, 76-78

Essa, E.L. (1994). Young children's understanding and experiences with death. Young Children, 49, 74-81

Goldman, L.E. (1996), We can help children grieve: A child oriented model for memorializing. Young Children, 51, 69-73

Pratt, C.A., Hare, J., & Wright, C. (1987). Death and dying in early childhood education: Are educators prepared. Education, 107, 279-286

Thornton, C. & Krajewski, J. (1993). Death education for teachers: A refocused concern relative to medically fragile children. Intervention In School Clinic, 29, 31-35